

MARIE DE VILLEMARE.

“AND we have a new governess!” exclaimed my young cousin Emma, ending a long list of novelties that had been added to the *agrémens* of St. Edmondsbury since the date of my former visit.

“Though last not the ‘least’ useful article in the catalogue,” I observed.

“Ah! but she is not cross, is she, Frank?” appealing to an urchin who had, unknown to me, possessed himself of my Brequet, and with a mischievous *penchant* for mechanics was striving to ascertain how a watch would manage its business with an embargo on its wheel.

“No,” he replied slowly; “no, not exactly cross, but very proud. Nurse says she has nothing to be proud of, for she is only an upper servant, after all.”

And this is the opinion inculcated into the children of the better classes; with such sentiments are they taught to regard those who are destined to qualify them for the station to which they belong! But “after all,” as my cousin Francis observed, “after all” it is hardly to be wondered at—for governesses are such amphibious animals, it is a difficult matter to determine what element is their native one. Like Mahomet’s coffin suspended midway—not, however, between heaven and earth, but between the drawing-room and the servants’-hall—objects of envy to the menials—of contempt to those whose offspring must be indebted to their talents and principles for all that enhances wealth or dignifies poverty.

Dinner was announced before I had concluded my toilette. The family were at table.

The “new governess” was not present. The guests were few; chiefly men immersed all day in mercantile pursuits abroad, and all the evening in sensual enjoyments at home.

At length the cloth was removed, the wine and fruit placed on the table, and in a few minutes the sound of many voices proclaimed the vicinity of the young ones.

Soon every unoccupied chair was filled. There was Emma, who was *sobriqueted* “Fairy,” for no other earthly reason but that she was as unlike her name as possible, being short, fat, and dumpy, with unmeaning blue eyes, and flaxen ringlets. Then came Frank, the ingenious watch spoiler, and Susan, and Tom, and others, whose appellatives and attributes (for, like heathen gods and goddesses on a small scale, each had some peculiar quality,) I have long since forgotten. But no governess swayed them.

“Where is Mademoiselle?” demanded my aunt with a portentous frown. “Why did she not come with you?”

“She had a head-ache,” answered one of the children. “I believe she is gone to bed.”

“Mamma,” observed Sarah, “you ought to speak to her. I observe she never makes her appearance at dessert when we have any one dining here.”

My smooth, snake-like cousin! How I hated her from that moment, and how I pitied the poor victim that was expected to

“ Come when they called,
Do as they bid,
Shut the door after her,
And ever get chid.”

The evening passed heavily enough. Sarah played on the piano, and accompanied it with her voice; but I am fastidious. I never could endure music, however correct, if uninspired by feeling; and my cousin's was uninspired, soulless, apathetic like herself.

The ensuing morning I was up with the dawn, and “out a-field,” as old Herrick hath it; for though a fine gentleman in town, I can really enjoy the rising of the sun in the country. It is very different to see his rich golden beams dispersing the pale amaranth clouds, and to see him half “hiding his diminished head” behind a mingled vapour of fog and smoke, and noxious exhalations. Yes, I really do like the sun when unadulterated!

I was strolling very leisurely through a tangled walk, which even Mrs. Vicars's prejudice for clipping and pruning had permitted to revel in native luxuriance, when I was attracted by the merry laughter of the children; so, gently putting aside the branches which obstructed my view of the meadow beyond, I observed at my leisure what was passing in front. On the ground, and resting against a gnarled oak that spread its thick branches far overhead, reclined one of the rarest creatures on whom eye ever rested. She seemed young—very young; but there was that in her face which told of “sorrows that had done the work of years.” A book rested on her knee, which, however, she was not suffered to peruse; for it was haymaking time, and the children in their joyous play were flinging over her showers of the fragrant grass. They had even despoiled her of her hat, and the wavy tresses of her long, glossy hair, dishevelled by the happy rioters, streamed down her shoulders in unconfined luxuriance.

I do not think I was intended for a “man of the world.” Nature originally designed me for some simple village swain, for I pitied this gentle stranger with a pity almost “akin to love.” Nothing, however, allied to the passion which my friends of the *beau monde* would dignify with the name: for mine was free from selfishness or desire of personal gratification.

With an instinctive feeling of delicacy for her situation, I forbore to make my presence known; and suffering the boughs to resume their former position I retraced my steps to the house.

In the evening, as Mr. Vicars had no guests, Mademoiselle de Villemare made her *entrée* with the children and the dessert. Not a word was addressed to her except by Mr. Vicars's eldest son, a young Oxonian, who endeavoured in execrable French to keep up a conversation with one who understood his native language far better than he understood hers. As for me, the common politeness of an introduction was disregarded; and I would not place her in an embarrassing position by pointedly addressing her; so Marie de Villemare set at the table of my *parvenu* relations as if she had been really a statue.

As my stay at St. Edmondsbury was prolonged, my knowledge of Mademoiselle ceased to be confined merely to tacit observation of her features at the dinner-table. One day I summoned courage, when

my aunt and Sarah were out visiting, to join my little cousins in a ramble, and thenceforward Marie and I were no longer strangers.

I found her to be a woman whose fortunes were unworthy her genius. A painter—a musician of no common order—and endowed in an extraordinary degree with poetic taste and feeling;—that she could waste her rare talents in a school-room afforded me frequent matter for surprise. But there was some mystery attached to her—a mystery that had faded her cheek, and stamped her noble brow with its impress.

From admiration and compassion the transition is rapid to love. I soon felt that, for me, life were henceforth a dreary blank unless illumined by her. Yet mine was no boyish passion. I was a man in age—a man, too, in feeling,—but I loved for the first time; and if it be with the heart as with the vegetable world, that the bud which is most tardy in developement produces the most lasting and exquisite flower, the inference is obvious, that my affection, the fruit of maturity, was more deep and enduring than if I had commenced running the gauntlet through the ranks of beauty years before.

But I received no testimony that the sentiment was reciprocated by Mademoiselle de Villemare; unless, indeed, I might construe her anxiety to escape from the vapid gallantry of Oxford John into a more decided preference for my quiet attentions. This vain fool, puffed up with arrogant notions of his vast consequence as eldest son of the wealthy Mr. Vicars, and as a companion of sundry unfledged lordlings who drank his Champagne, rode his hunters, and borrowed his money, even went so far as to make me the confidant of his intention to transplant his sisters' governess to some bachelor domicile of his own. How I avoided knocking him down I now wonder; but my anger was restrained by consideration for the fair object of my devotion, and I listened as calmly as I could to the history of his intentions in her favour. However, one morning he entered my room in a towering passion; and after numerous gentle expletives, he called on me to join with him in cursing the impudence of foreigners generally, and of Mademoiselle de Villemare in particular.

“What has she done?” I demanded.

“See!” he exclaimed, pulling forth some papers,—“see the d—d way in which she has served me!”

He then proceeded to explain, that he had on the previous evening, through the medium of the nursery-maid, conveyed her an epistle proposing the delicate arrangement at which he had hinted in former conversations with me. “And how do you suppose she answered me? Why, by returning my letter torn in pieces, and with it this impertinent note,” handing me one which I opened, and read as follows:

“SIR,

“Enclosed, you will receive my definitive reply to the proposal you have presumed to make me. It depends wholly on yourself whether it remain a secret—a hint even to Mr. John Vicars will suffice to ensure me from a repetition of the insult.”

I sought her that evening. The result of our interview was unmitigated disappointment to me, and sorrow to both. She gently

but decisively rejected the offer of my hand and fortune—told me there existed an insurmountable barrier to her union with any one; and told it in such a way as convinced me that, even were it removed, she could never be mine. I asked no explanation, for I felt it would be vain to hope for a change in her sentiments. I bade her a respectful farewell, and ere an hour had elapsed was far from the spot.

Three years had passed away, and I stood upon the deck of a Calais steamer which was about to convey me to my native shore after a protracted tour, and like all my countrymen I had managed, without intending it, to get involved in the political squabbles of every territory I visited. In Germany I had been almost compelled to confess myself *au fait* to the mysteries of the Burschenschaft: in Italy narrowly avoided being made a peace-offering to Austrian justice, for commiserating the sufferings of Silvio Pellico; and in France just escaped with life from the events of “the three glorious days.”

As I leaned over the side of the vessel I was startled by a voice near me repeating, as if unconsciously, the first lines of Marie Stuart's farewell.

“Adieu, plaisant pays de France !
O ma patrie la plus chérie,
Qui a nourrie ma jeune enfance !
Adieu, France ! adieu, mes beaux jours.”

I turned; the stranger raising his hat politely begged pardon for having intruded on me, and would have passed on; but there was in his air and address something that riveted my attention and induced me to enter into conversation with him.

I soon discovered that my new acquaintance possessed a mind of no common order. His views were extended—his ideas expressed with an eloquent originality that I never heard surpassed. He was evidently broken in fortunes, and depressed in spirit; but occasional flashes of commanding intellect told of mental power and energy, which though blighted, was not destroyed.

I found that he was poor and friendless; and, worse than all, suffering under a still unhealed wound which he had received in the struggle of July.

“But I shall soon be well; and if not, *il faut être content. On ne peut mourir qu'une fois!*”

At Dover I parted from my agreeable companion, for he was too much fatigued to continue his journey; and I was anxious to meet an only sister, from whom I had been separated many years. However, we exchanged cards, and he faithfully promised to call on me on his arrival in London.

“And you have returned the same Horace Trevor as ever,” exclaimed my sister, as we sat at breakfast on the following morning. “Still *garçon*—still living on the memories of the past;—*à propos de cela*, I know your Marie de Villemare.”

“You know Marie de Villemare!” I repeated.

“Even so,” she answered; “and if you can be patient you shall hear all about it. Last year, after those old women at the Admiralty had sent away my poor Hamilton, I found myself, as you may suppose, terribly sad and lonely here in town, and I was just

meditating an elopement to Scotland among the clan, when one day Mrs. Vicars paid me a visit, and pressed and worried me so to accompany her home to St. Edmondsbury, that to get rid of her importunity I consented. There I went—there I found that sweetest of creatures, Marie de Villemare,—and there I learned to love her hardly less enthusiastically than yourself. I saw that the feeble minds among whom her lot was cast could ill appreciate the tone of her character; and I was wicked enough to try to seduce her to myself. But I failed of success; she expressed her warmest thanks for my ‘kindness,’ as she termed my selfish attempt, but declined my proposal. Since then the feelings of the Vicars have undergone a revolution towards her. By some chance they discovered that she had rejected the matrimonial overtures of their son and heir, now a lieutenant in the Blues, who, finding it useless to offer less, had tendered his hand and fortune for her acceptance. This raised her character in their opinion, and thenceforth she was treated with courtesy. But the triumph of Marie was not complete until last spring, when Mr. Vicars, from unexpected losses, was for some time on the verge of bankruptcy. With right and honest principle he avowed his difficulties to Mademoiselle de Villemare, and entreated her to seek a better situation than he could from that time afford her. But she refused; said she was so much attached to the children that she could not bear to leave them, and that she neither required nor would receive any salary for her future services.

“You may imagine,” continued Isabel, “what the feelings of my uncle were, at such disinterested conduct in one whom he had formerly regarded with contempt. I am happy to say his embarrassments were merely temporary, and our dear Marie is now as highly valued as her virtues deserve.” * * *

The night was stormy, and the rain descended in torrents as I alighted from my cab in an obscure quarter of Westminster.

My poor French friend De Clairac was ill—perhaps dying! For many months I had seen him almost daily; our casual meeting on board the steam-boat having ripened into intimacy. True, his manner and temper were at times moody; but I made allowance for a mind soured by calamity, and for a frame bowed beneath torturing disease,—for his wound had never closed, and though he would not condescend to complain, traces of his sufferings were too plainly visible in his attenuated frame and the faded lustre of his eye.

I had just turned the angle of a street, when I perceived, by the dim light of a solitary lamp, a female struggling in the grasp of a coarse fellow a few paces before me. It was but the impulse of a moment, and the drunken reprobate measured his length on the pavement, from whence he showed little disposition to rise, while the trembling woman proceeded on her way. I followed, and speedily overtook her, though she walked with a rapid step.

“Pardon me,” I said, perceiving by her attire that it was no common person I addressed,—“pardon me if I suggest the propriety of your suffering me to protect you until you emerge into a more frequented quarter.”

At the sound of my voice she turned round. Merciful heavens! Mademoiselle de Villemare! I was about to ask her the reason of

her mysterious presence in that neighbourhood, when she paused at the door of a humble dwelling. It was a corner house, and instinctively I cast up my eyes to seek the name of the street.

"Why, surely," I exclaimed, "this is the place to which De Clairac's note directed me."

"De Clairac!" repeated Marie with a faint cry; "De Clairac! do you know him?"

"I am here at his own request," and I raised my hand to the knocker, but she arrested it.

"Stay, do not disturb him; I can admit you;" and thus saying she produced a pass-key, and in another moment I found myself in a narrow passage dimly lighted by a miserable candle which rested on a painted slab. My guide, taking the light, led the way into a scantily-furnished parlour, where a few decaying embers in the grate alone gave evidence of habitation.

For a few seconds we were both silent, at a loss to commence the conversation. Mademoiselle de Villemare was the first to resume composure. "Do you wish to see my—to see the Count?" she asked.

Marie seemed to read the thoughts which were passing in my mind, for her brow contracted, and a bright flush flitted for an instant across her cheek, and then died away leaving it more pallid than I had ever seen it. She drew her slight figure proudly up, and calmly said, "Do not question me now; I will not be suspected. You will know all soon."

She left me, and I remained alone until a servant appeared, and conducted me to De Clairac's room.

He was alone, reclining on a sofa near the fire. His languid eye brightened on seeing me; and he stretched out his wasted hand to welcome me. As I gazed on his emaciated features, it required not the gift of prescience to perceive that nothing short of a miracle would ever restore poor De Clairac, or renew the lamp of life already flickering towards extinction. I told him of my absence from town, which had prevented me from receiving his note until that day; and I spoke of the returning spring as a restorative for his shattered constitution.

"No, no," he said, in a broken voice; "I shall never see that season: all is nearly over here," placing his hand on his heart, "and I do not regret it except for the sake of one to whom I would make reparation. Marie, *ma bonne amie!*" he cried; and at the summons the door of an inner apartment opened, and Mademoiselle de Villemare, having exchanged her wet garments for a loose white *robe de chambre*, entered.

"Marie, these cushions are not comfortable," said the invalid; "no one can arrange them as well as you;" and in another moment she was bending over the Count with the solicitude of one whose heart was in her avocation.

"Marie, this is Mr. Trevor, the friend of whom I have spoken to you. And this, Trevor," turning to me, "is Marie de Clairac, my own inestimable wife!"

I was hardly surprised, for I had expected some such disclosure; but to say that I did not experience a pang at the discovery would be assuming credit for self-denial which I did not deserve.

"I have known Mr. Trevor several years," said Marie.

"And why did you not tell me so?" demanded the sick man, turning fiercely towards her.

"Simply because, though you often talked of your friend, you never named him."

The quiet dignity of the reply convinced De Clairac that there had been no intentional concealment; and with a sudden revulsion of feeling he hastily demanded pardon of his lovely nurse. In reply she bent her lips to her husband's forehead, but I am certain I heard her sigh as she did so.

And in what a predicament was I placed! In the presence of a friend, to whose wife I had unwittingly paid my addresses, and whom I still adored with all the madness and hopelessness of passion! But Madame de Clairac, as if in pity for the awkwardness of my position, soon retired, and then came the long-desired explanation of the mystery which had so long puzzled me.

It was but the repetition of an often-told tale. De Clairac, attracted by the youthful charms of Marie de Villemare, and proud of bearing off a prize for which many a noble heart beside contended, burst the chains that bound him to the feet of the Marquise du D——, and wooed and won the fair object of his passion. After the first effervescence of romance had subsided, her rare genius and spotless purity might perhaps have secured the conquest her matchless beauty had gained, but that in an evil hour for both, the Count was chosen a member of the legislature; and thenceforward their happy home in the valleys of Touraine was exchanged for the bustle and dissipation of the capital. To be brief, De Clairac again yielded himself to the blandishments of his former enslaver; and poor Marie was neglected—still worse, was compelled by her infatuated husband to submit to the pollution of her rival's visits! Yet she murmured not, for she well knew that tears and upbraidings will not bring back truant love; and are, besides, the feeblest weapon an injured wife can have recourse to. Moreover, she still hoped to win him when the intoxication of passion should have given place to sober reflection.

But she was not suffered to enjoy her flattering delusion. While weeping beside the death-bed of her only child, the savage inhumanity of Madame du D—— contrived that she should find, as if accidentally, a letter written by De Clairac to that lady, in which he utterly disclaimed ever having loved Marie, and offered to sacrifice her society at the bidding of his enchantress.

"My unhappy girl!" continued the penitent husband, while tears rolled in quick succession down his pale face,—“my unhappy, injured wife! this was the last bitter drop in the chalice,—and she drained it to the very dregs. When I arrived at the chateau, whither I hastened on the tidings of my Adalbert's danger, I found the household in confusion—my lovely boy was no more—and the Countess had mysteriously disappeared the night of his decease. Nor could all our inquiries obtain the least clue to her place of concealment—for I had at first refused to concur in the fears of those around me that in the desperation of her maternal anguish she had sought a grave in the waters of the Loire—and it was not until I found the fatal letter that I renounced all hope of finding her. Then I called to mind her purity of character—her gentleness—her

talents—and, above all, her enthusiastic attachment to me: and I trembled to think that in the anguish of finding herself so cruelly betrayed—so heartlessly forsaken, her over-wrought spirit might have tempted her to lay violent hands on her life. From the demon who had led to such dreadful results, I from that hour turned with loathing and abhorrence; and if to bear about a heart insensible to enjoyment—if to feel the never-dying worm of remorse preying on existence—if this be punishment, Marie, thou hast been amply avenged!

“But a few weeks ago, a new light broke on my darkened soul. An old servant, who had often nursed Marie de Villemare in his arms when she was an infant, being on his death-bed, confessed that at her earnest entreaty he had aided my wife to leave the chateau on the night of her child’s death, and had conducted her to a convent at some distance, of which a relative of her mother’s was abbess; that from thence she had proceeded to England, where, when last he had heard of her, she was employed as a governess. Some time elapsed, and I could decide on no plan to discover her abode: you were out of town, and I had no person with whom to advise. So at last I bethought me of inserting an advertisement in some of the leading journals—here it is,” and he handed me a paper, in which I read to this effect:

“Should this paper meet the eye of Marie de C——, who left the Chateau ——, near Tours, on the night of the 17th of June, 1826, she is entreated to evince her forgiveness by addressing Achille de C——, No. 27, N—— Street, Westminster.”

“And the result was——”

“Successful. In less than twenty-four hours I held Marie in my arms.”

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It was about three weeks after this interview that early one morning I received a hurried scrawl from Marie, imploring my immediate presence in N—— Street, a sudden alteration in the invalid having much alarmed her. I hastened there, and found that during the few hours which had elapsed from my last visit an awful change had indeed taken place. It was but too evident that the sufferings of poor De Clairac were about to terminate.

I drew the physician aside. “Is there no hope?” I asked.

“None—he is even now dying—human skill can be of no farther avail.”

I understood the hint; the doctor pocketed his last fee and departed.

On re-entering the apartment I found Marie engaged in prayer beside her husband. Often in my visits had I seen her thus employed, and always with increasing reverence,—for, beautiful as woman is in all the gentle charities of life, never does she appear so eminently glorious, never so elevated above the things of time and sense, as when ministering to the spiritual wants of those most dear to her—especially those about to be removed for ever from her cares! The chamber of death is the scene of her greatest triumphs. There she is no longer a mere thing of human impulse or human prejudice. Her very step is instinct with sensibility; and even when breath

and hope have passed away, her heart still fondly lingers near the temple from whence the beloved and immortal tenant has for ever departed.

And the shadows of "the night that knows no morrow" were gradually settling over that beloved countenance on which the gaze of the heart-broken wife was riveted with all the passionate tenderness of one about to be severed from the last tie that bound her to earth. The intensity of her woe admitted not of tears or lamentations; and there she stood wiping away the clammy dew that hung in pearls upon his forehead, as unmoved and nearly as death-like as him she attended. The stony composure of her manner did not deceive me, for there was something in the fixed stare of her dark eye that made my soul shudder within me. I would have given worlds to see her weep—rave—do anything except remain thus rigid and motionless o'er those pallid lips.

They were silent for ever—the heart so lately sentient had ceased to exist, and Marie only clung to what had been her husband!

Madame de Clairac's reason never recovered the shock of her husband's death. He had been her first love; and in her bosom, which was filled with enthusiasm to overflowing, there was no room for secondary passion. Even her affection for her child had taken its colouring from her conjugal devotion; and from the moment that reunited her to De Clairac, her all of life condensed itself into the dream of restoring him to health, and retiring with him and the wreck of their fortune to some quiet retreat in their native land. But the frail bark in which she had embarked all her hopes foundered; and the dreamer was awakened, never to repose again in such an Eden! Her powerful mind was shattered by its very strength. Had she struggled less for the painful pre-eminence of concealing the barbed arrow within her bosom, all might have been well at last, and Madame de Clairac as happy in after years as her genius and virtues deserved. But it is in vain to fancy what might have been. God willed it otherwise, and I have learned the bitter but salutary lesson of submission.

She died—died in a fitting season for one so good, so gentle, and so fair! In the last days of autumn,—when the bright flowers and green leaves were fading,—when the summer-birds were winging their way to more propitious skies, Marie de Clairac passed to her eternal rest!

They lie side by side. Their lowly grave lies a little apart from the others which fill the enclosure, and is sheltered by a noble lime-tree;

"Nor storied urn, nor monumental bust"

is there. A simple headstone, with the inscription A—— de C——, obiit 3rd April 1832, aged 33.—M—— de C——, obiit 25th October 1832, aged 26," constitute the only memorial of the ill-fated pair.

"Peace to the broken-hearted dead!"